

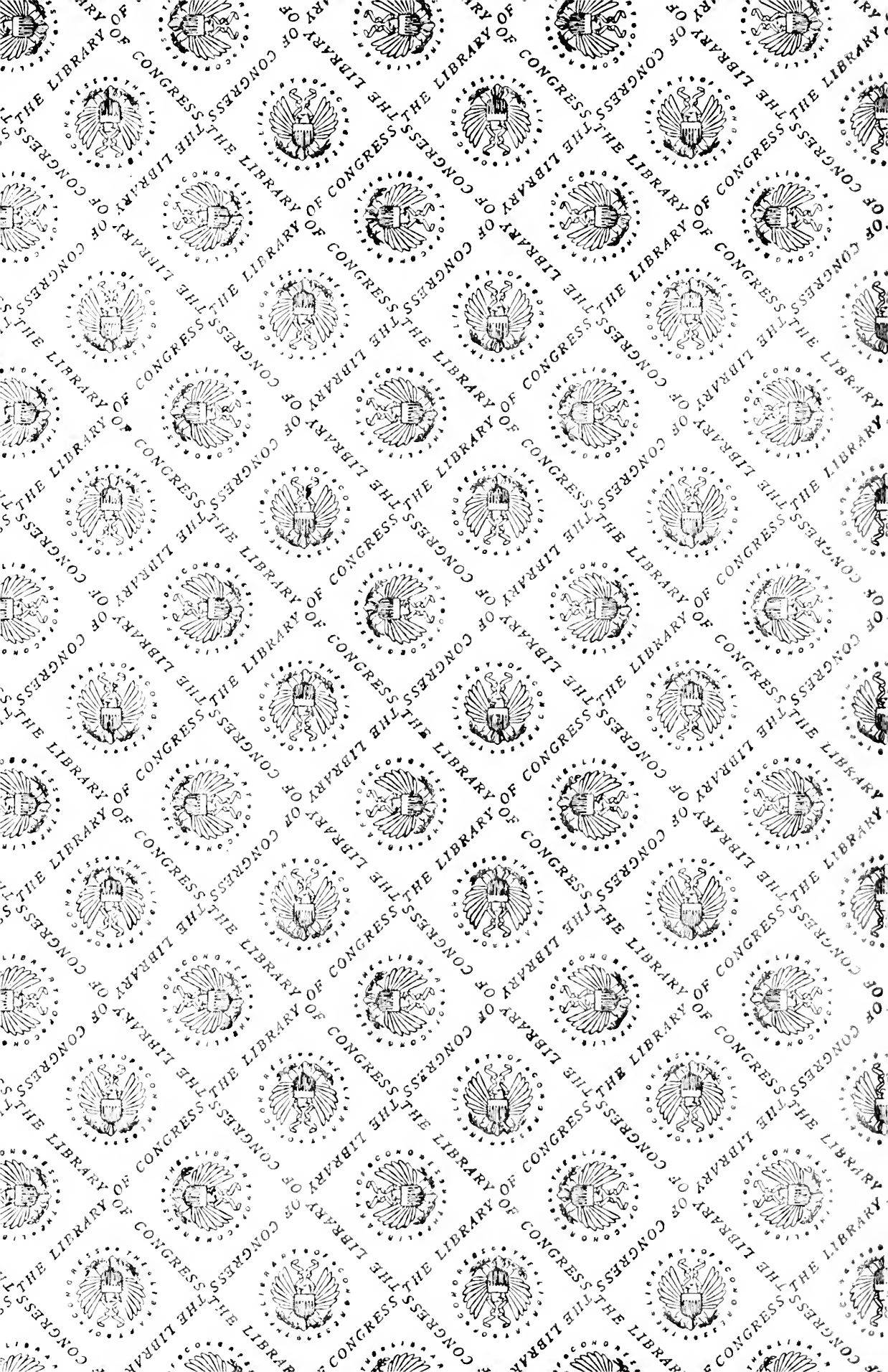
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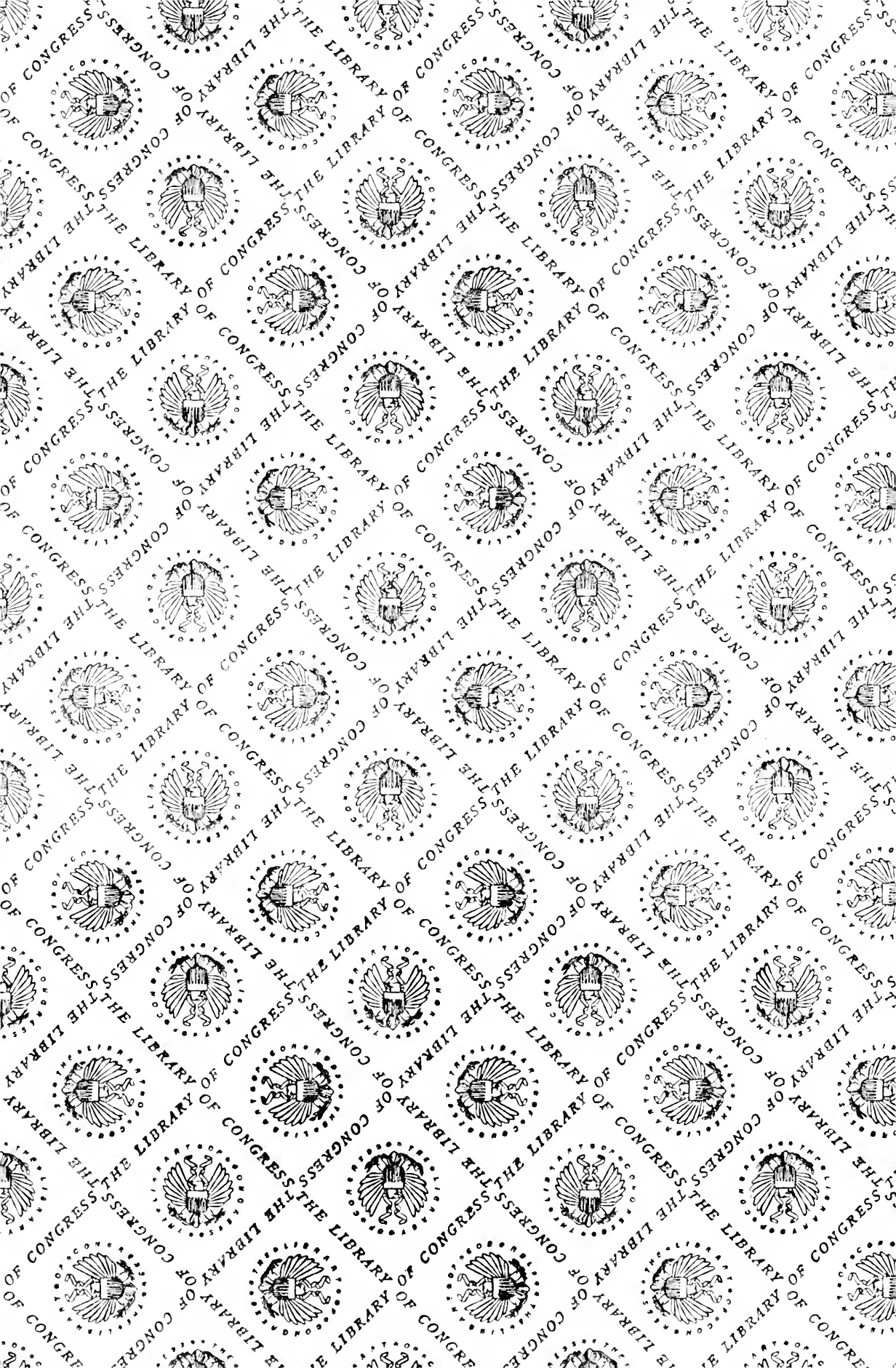
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# The Wallabout Prison Ships

1776-1783

By EUGENE L. ARMBRUSTER



# THE WALLABOUT PRISON SHIPS

1776-1783

BY  
EUGENE L. ARMBRUSTER

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of which this is No. ....

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## INTRODUCTION

Research work in local history, extended over a period of more than a fourth of a century, has often brought before the writer contradictory statements regarding the Wallabout Prisonships. During all these years, whenever there had been occasion to mention Wallabout Bay, he disposed of the matter by stating "this is the place where the Prison-ships were stationed during the Revolutionary War." Finally, however, his interest was aroused by reading again and again the statements of other writers, and he set out to search among the oldest available sources for original records. Not taking the judgment of later writers, he gathered the fragments, in a similar way as they had done, hoping thus to be enabled to get a clearer vision of the case. He soon found that the earlier writers could not be considered impartial, as their families, almost without an exception, had had members among the prisoners in the New York City Prisons or else on these Prison ships. They were human and could not forget the misery which their kinsmen had endured. But they were also honest enough to mention such facts which would throw kindlier lights upon this dark scene, and, further, often expressed their own doubts as to the correctness of some statements, which they were forced to incorporate into their narratives. As these writers, without exception, have condemned the Prison ships, it would be wasting time to quote each one separately. After almost one and a half centuries have since rolled by, it may be well to look into the case once more, from our 20th century point of view, making use of all sources now at our command. We may today better understand the causes of some happenings which appeared to the unfortunate prisoners to be intended cruelty. We further have the benefit of the records compiled in later years, scanty though they be.

## THE NAVY

[J. Fenimore Cooper's *Naval History*] : "The documents connected with the early history of the American Navy were never kept with sufficient method and the few that did exist have become much scattered and lost in consequence of there having been no regular Navy Department, the authority of this branch of the government having been exercised throughout the whole war by Committees and Boards, the members of which have probably retained many documents of interest as vouchers to authenticate their own proceedings. Among other defects it has become impossible to establish, in all cases, who did and who did not actually serve in the Marine of the United States, officers so frequently passing from the Privateers into the public vessels, and from the public vessels to the Privateers, as to leave this important branch of our subject involved in much obscurity. The officers in the Navy of the Confederation also derived their authority from different sources, a circumstance which adds to the difficulties. In a good many instances Congress made the appointments; subsequently the Marine Committee possessed this power and finally even the commanders of squadrons and ships were put in possession of blank commissions to be filled at their discretion. The men who acted under the authority of Washington at the commencement of the war were not in the Navy, as some of these men were later rewarded ranks in the service. Congress passed a resolution on October 13, 1775, which directed a Committee of Three to fit out two swift sailing vessels of 10 and 14 guns respectively to intercept the British transports intended for the Army at Boston. On October 30, this committee was increased to seven, and two ships of 20 and 36 guns respectively were ordered to be provided. In December, 1775, Congress ordered thirteen ships to be built by the Colonies, and the Marine Committee was increased so as to have one member for each colony. A Continental Navy Board was established in November, 1776; a Board of Admiralty was established in October, 1779. A Secretary of the Navy was

chosen in February, 1781. An Agent of the Marine was appointed in August, 1781, who had full control of the service." (The Navy Department was not established until 1797.)

"In June, 1776, American cruisers captured about 500 British soldiers upon transports; this not only weakened the enemy's army, but also checked his intention of treating American prisoners as rebels, by giving the colonists the means of retaliation, as well as of exchange. English accounts state that near a hundred privateers had been fitted out in New England alone in the first two years of the war, and the British seamen employed against the United States are said to have been 26,000. The Remembrancer, an English work of merit, published a list of English vessels taken by American cruisers in 1776, in all 342, of which number 44 were recaptured, 18 released and 4 burned. The Americans lost many privateers and merchantmen from time to time, and the war became very destructive for both sides. The British lost 467 sail of merchantmen during 1777, though they kept a force of about 70 men-of-war along the American coast. Many American Privateers fell into the hands of the British, and a scarcity of men began to be felt in consequence of the numbers detained in English prisons. In 1778 the war broke out between England and France, and a French fleet appeared in July in the American seas and relieved the United States greatly. The British destroyed six of their ships near Newport to prevent their falling into the hands of the French. (England also declared war on Holland at the end of the year 1780.) In the summer of 1776 the nautical enterprise of the country had been let loose upon the British commerce. Something like 800 British sail of merchantmen were captured during the first two years of privateering; then the effort of the Americans necessarily lessened, while the precaution of the British increased. Owing to the want of ships in the Navy many officers of the Navy were compelled to seek service in the Privateers."

The British regarded the American colonies as their rebellious colonies. The damage done by the Privateersmen to the British ships was enormous, and the Britons could at

all times easier endure anything else than interference with their supremacy upon the seas. Nearly all wars carried on by that country were based upon the principle that England must rule the seas, and whoever interferes with that principle is their bitter foe, and will always be treated as such. Hence the hatred of small minds among the British officials against the unfortunate crews of American Privateersmen who fell into their hands and were sent to the prison ships.

### PRISONERS IN TIME OF DIRE WANT

The crews of these Privateersmen were mostly healthy young men from the New England colonies, but food was scarce on land and consequently also on board of ships. The health of these men was soon undermined, after they became located in the prison ships.

[Jones' New York during the Revolution, I, p. 599, from Force, 5th Series, Vol. I, p. 835]: "Washington wrote on August 9, 1776, to the President of Congress regarding the Army: We have fit for duty 10,514 men; sick, present, 3,039; sick, absent, 629; in command, 2,946; on furlough, 97; total, 17,225. Every day more or less are taken down. These things are melancholy, but they are nevertheless true. I hope for better."

[Paul Allen's American Revolution, Vol. II, p. 212]: "The American soldiers in active service are described as having been at one period without clothes and shoes and covers to lie on. Pierre Van Cortland writes under January 30, 1780, to the Committee of Rombout Precinct that the troops of the New York lines are almost destitute of shirts. Washington writes: The soldiers eat every kind of horse food but hay. Clothing became so scarce in the Highlands that a building was erected at Fishkill as a retreat for naked men. Soldiers patched their clothes until patches and clothes both gave out, and they were sent to this retreat. The army suffered extreme privation during the winter of 1779-80."

The shortage in everything on the American side was paralleled by a shortage on the British side. The British asked



Washington to exchange prisoners. Congress insisted that its resolution should be complied with. Washington said: "It may be thought contrary to our interest to go into an exchange, as the enemy would derive more immediate advantage from it than we should. I cannot doubt that Congress will authorize me through commissioners to settle a cartel, any resolutions heretofore to the contrary notwithstanding."

[Jones' New York during the Revolution, Vol. II, p. 425; from Force's American Archives, 5th Series, Vol. III, p. 838]: "The known shortage of provisions in New York during November and December, 1776, and January and February, 1777, from which the British Army suffered, had a good deal to do with the famine and mortality of the prisoners of war at that period. Washington himself attributes them to this cause in a letter to Col. Atlee."

[Jones' New York during the Revolution, Vol. II, p. 425; from Force's American Archives, 5th Series, Vol. III, p. 858]: "Provisions in general were scarce and dear, flour in particular, and all kinds of vegetables, that our officers who are prisoners with the enemy are walking about, but the soldiers are closely confined and allowed but half allowances, that the prisoners were very sickly and died fast, is the testimony of David Hunt of Westchester, a known friend to America, as taken and reported by General McDougal on November 26, 1776, four days previous to which he had left New York."

[Stiles' History of Brooklyn, Vol. I, p. 341] says under March, 1779: "Flour exhausted. Hessians at Brooklyn received damaged oatmeal. The British were expected to surrender in order to escape starvation, when supply ships arrived. Fuel always very scarce."

[Valentine's New York Common Council Manual, 1853, p. 464]: "The winter of 1780 was so intensely cold that two cakes of ice completely closed the North River from Powle's Hook Ferry to that of Cortlandt Street. Hundreds of persons crossed daily; artillery, sleighs with provisions and stores of all kinds passed the bridge of ice. It continued some considerable time. Governor Tryon caused the same to be measured and found the North River in that place 2,000 yards wide."

[Onderdonck's Revolutionary Incidents of Suffolk Co. and Kings Co., p. 233]: "December, 1781, Washington said: 'For two years past no complaints have been made of the treatment of land prisoners in New York. The suffering of seamen for some time past arises mostly from the want of a general regulation, that no American Privateersmen should set their prisoners free, whereas now the British prisoners enter the American service or are allowed to escape, so that the balance of prisoners is against the Americans.'"

Washington had been compelled, a year earlier, to decline the exchange of prisoners. When the British had offered to send in exchange for British seamen, American Naval Prisoners, there were no British seamen at hand, and when they offered to take British soldiers instead, Washington said, though urged by humanity, such exchange was not politic. It would give force to the British and add but little to their own, few of the American Prisoners belonging to the Army and the enlistment of those who did, nearly being expired. Again, in 1782 he had to refuse such offer, saying few or none of the Naval Prisoners in New York belonged to the Continental service. About that time he communicated with the British Admiral Digby, trying to improve the conditions of these prisoners. He said: "I am informed that the principal complaint is that of their being crowded, especially at this season (July) in great numbers on board of foul and infectious Prison ships, where disease and death are almost inevitable." Lewis Pintard was appointed to look after the welfare of the Prisoners, Congress furnishing him with some funds and he adding his own funds until he became embarrassed. His work was continued by his nephew, John Pintard.

[Dunlap's History of New York, Vol. II, p. 239]: "January 29, 1781, David Sprout, Commissary of Naval Prisoners in North America, in a letter to Abraham Skinner, the American Commissary of Prisoners, defends the treatment aboard the Prison ships, acknowledging that very many of the Prisoners are sick and dying, etc., etc. He says he has offered to exchange Prisoners, man for man, for as many as shall be sent within the British lines."

[Stiles' History of Brooklyn, Vol. I, p. 356]: "British General permitted Prisoners on the Jersey in 1782 to petition Washington for help. The Prisoners promised, if their release could be procured, they would gladly enter the American Army and serve during the remainder of the war as soldiers." Answer, *ibid*, p. 357: "The officers of the General Government only took charge of those seamen who were captured by the vessels in the service, and therefore had not enough seamen to give in exchange."

[Onderdonck's Rev. Inc., Suffolk Co. and Kings Co., p. 240]: Under June 1, 1782, British Commissary Sproat (or Sprout) wrote to the American Commissary Skinner, informing him, by order of Admiral Digby, that "the very great increase of Prisoners and the heat of the weather now baffles all our care and attention to keep them healthy. Five ships have been taken up for their reception to prevent their being crowded, and a great number permitted to go on parole. In winter and during cold weather they lived comfortably, being supplied with warm clothing, blankets, etc., purchased with the money I collected from the charitable in the city, but now the weather requires a fresh supply, something light and suitable for the season, for which you will be pleased to make the necessary provision, as it is impossible for them to be healthy in the rags they now wear, without a single shift of clothing to keep them clean." Skinner replied under June 9: "From the present situation of the American Naval Prisoners on board your Prison ship, I am induced to propose to you the exchange of as many of them as I can give you British Naval Prisoners for, leaving the balance already due you to be paid when in our power. (Upwards of 1,300 Naval Prisoners have been sent more than we have received.) We are unable at present to give you seamen for seamen, and thereby relieve the Prison ships of their dreadful burden; but it ought to be remembered that there is a large balance (Sproat says only 245.—Ed.) of British soldiers due the U. S. since February last, and we may be disposed to place the British soldiers in our possession in as disagreeable a situation as the men are on board the Prison ships." Sproat replies June 9, and refuses a partial exchange.

Washington said: "Exchanging seamen for soldiers was contrary to the original agreement. Officers should be exchanged for officers, soldiers for soldiers, seamen for seamen, and citizens for citizens. It would be contrary to the practice of other nations and the soundest policy, by giving the enemy a great and permanent strength. But as the misery and mortality which prevailed among the Naval Prisoners was produced almost entirely by the mode of confinement, being closely crowded in infectious ships, he would write to Admiral Digby, for it is preposterously cruel, he said, to confine 800 men in one ship at this sultry season. We have the means of retaliation in our hands, which we should not hesitate to use, by confining the land prisoners with as much severity as our seamen are held.

[Jones' *New York During the Revolution*, Vol. I, p. 351.] Judge Jones blames Joshua Loring, the American Commissary of Prisoners, for the death of many American Prisoners, saying that he appropriated two-thirds of the rations, actually starving 300 before an exchange took place in February, 1777. Hundreds were so enfeebled that numbers died when released and reached their homes, or even on their way home.

[Watson's *Annals of New York*, p. 332]: "Our officers, it seems, but rarely visited their countrymen prisoners, saying as their reason, to what purpose repeat our visits to these abodes of misery and despair when they had neither relief to administer nor comfort to bestow. They rather chose to turn the eye from a scene they could not ameliorate. It was not without remark, too, that there was an impediment to their release by exchange maintained by the American rulers themselves, who were either unable or unwilling to sustain a direct exchange, because they foresaw that the British soldiers, when released, would immediately form new combatants against them, whereas our own men, especially of the militia, were liable to fall back into non-combatants, and perhaps, withal, dispirit the chance of new levies. Perhaps the stoical virtue of the rigorous times made apathy in such a cause the less exceptionable. On the other hand, the British wished the Prisoners to apostatize, and nothing was so likely to influence defection as the wish to escape from sickness and starvation.

[Watson's Annals of New York, p. 338]: "It has always been to me a strange and unexplained thing why the American families in New York did not do more than they did for the Prisoners, while the British merchants in London subscribed \$20,000 for the American Prisoners in England. We hear nothing of similar doings by New Yorkers at home! They could not have been all Tories, and all hardhearted, and yet, somehow, they were sadly neglected."

Captive officers of the land and sea forces were exchanged for men of same rank. Soldiers, sailors (of the Navy) and citizens were exchanged for soldiers, sailors and citizens. Captives taken on American and French Privateersmen and merchantmen, when landed in English ports, were exchanged for British Prisoners at Brest, France, but the men of the same class, when landed in American ports, were brought to the Prison ships in the Wallabout and had to remain there.

[The Adventures of Ebenezer Fox.] Fox tells us, on page 133: "The long detention of American sailors on board of British ships was to be attributed to the little pains that were taken by our countrymen to retain British subjects who were taken prisoners on the ocean during the war. Our Privateers captured many British seamen, who, when willing to enlist in our service, as was generally the case, were received on board of our ships. Those who were brought into ports were suffered to go at large, for in the impoverished condition of the country no state or town was willing to subject itself to the expense of maintaining prisoners in a state of confinement to provide for themselves. In this way the number of British seamen was too small for a regular and equal exchange. Thus the British seamen, after their capture, enjoyed the blessings of liberty, the light of sun, and the purity of the atmosphere, while the poor American sailors were compelled to drag out a miserable existence amid want and distress, famine and pestilence. As every principle of justice and humanity was disregarded by the British in the treatment of these prisoners, so likewise every moral and legal right was violated in compelling them to enter into their service."



The British finding that they had a great number of American and French Prisoners at their hands, for which existed no possibility of exchange during the war, which had to be clothed and fed, when clothing and food were very scarce, encouraged the Prisoners to secure their liberty for money. Fox tells us on page 131 that within a certain period 200 disappeared on the Jersey. The money was given to the officers on board and the Prisoners were reported dead. On page 135 Fox mentions 300 men were pressed into British service at one occasion. They were selected by an officer and ordered to leave the ship and go with him.

The Americans, however, used the same method to increase their forces. Paul Allen, in his *American Revolution*, Vol. II, p. 257, says: "The French king consented to the desire expressed by Congress to recruit for their ships among the English Prisoners in France, requiring only that it should be managed with prudence and precaution. The British were short of men on board their ships; the American sailors, kept confined upon the Wallabout Prison ships were a burden, but could become a valuable asset if they enlisted in the British Navy. Sentiment or patriotism were not to be considered, for the British existed only one way of looking upon this matter. The following article shows how they acted in a similar case 38 years earlier, when the victims were men of their own kind:

[*Her Majesty's Navy*, by Lt. C. R. Low, Vol. I, p. 173]: "During the war with Spain Commodore Anson's squadron of five ships-of-war and a few small ships was delayed in 1740 by the want of men, but to fill up the required 300 he could only obtain 170, of whom 98 were marines and 32 convalescents from the hospitals. The troops were to consist of 500 out-pensioners of Chelsea Hospital, of whom, however, only 250 were embarked, all those who could walk having deserted. Such were the conditions under which too often ships were manned in days when even the press gangs failed to supply the proper complement. To fill the place of the 240 invalid deserters, 210 marine recruits, wholly undisciplined, were embarked, and thus manned the squadron sailed on September 18

from Portsmouth on a commission which was to last three or more years in waters where the British flag was wholly unknown (i. e., the Pacific Ocean, where the squadron was to harry and plunder the Spanish settlements) and where the succor of a friendly port was out of the question. The barbarity of sending out to die, veterans and invalids, who had devoted their health and the best years of their lives to the service of their country, was only equalled by the folly of expecting any efficient service from men thus crippled."

All sorts of news and rumors relating to the Prison ships were published in the newspapers of the various cities, some no doubt being exaggerated. Clippings from these papers were later used in compiling the story of the Prison ships. The diary of Captain Jabez Fitch, a prisoner on the Jersey, furnishes a good illustration for this. He states that the captives were told all kinds of untrue stories of late events, that the Indians were ravaging the frontier towns all through the country, etc., etc. The Prisoners were allowed to send one of their number, a captain, to Connecticut, with letters for their friends, to procure clothing, money, etc., for them. Through their letters all the false reports, which the Prisoners in good faith had mentioned therein, were spread through Connecticut. Newspapers printed such news, which were apt to become incorporated in the various narratives, compiled and published in later years.

## THE PRISON SHIPS

[Stiles' History of Brooklyn, Vol. I, p. 60]: "The Prison ships were condemned vessels of war, totally unsuitable for places of confinement, and while the abstract right of the enemy to use them as such is unquestionable, yet there was not the least necessity of so doing, when within a stone's throw were broad acres of unoccupied land, much better suited for the purpose."

But the very fact that the near-by land was unoccupied made it unsuitable for the purpose. Building material was not obtainable. The barracks for the British troops were built with lumber procured by taking down frame church buildings,

some far out on the island. Dr. Stiles says further: "In evidence that the Americans did not question the right of the British to use these ships for prisons, we may cite the fact that in 1782 a vessel fitly named the Retaliation was fitted up as a Prison ship, moored in the Thames River, near New London, Connecticut, and used as a place of confinement for captured British seamen."

[Jones' Hist. of N. Y. during the Revolutionary War, Vol. I, pp. 705-710.] Judge Jones, the Loyalist, describes the American Prison ships, alias Fleet Prison, at Esopus Landing and the treatment of the British Prisoners aboard.

[Stiles' Hist. of Brooklyn, Vol. I, p. 333]: The first Prison ship to arrive at the Wallabout was the Whitby, in October, 1776. She was crowded; there were over 250 prisoners aboard, including many landsmen (probably Whigs from Long Island). In 1777 two hospital ships were added, which were destroyed by fire, one in October, 1777, and the other in February, 1778. The Good Hope, Captain Nelson, came in January, 1780, but was destroyed by fire on March 5, 1780. The prisoners were temporarily put on board of ships wintering in Wallabout Bay. In April, 1780, the Jersey arrived, being used as the receiving ship. She took over all prisoners excepting the sick, which were transferred aboard the Hope and Falmouth, two hospital ships, which also came to this place at that time. Andros, a prisoner and later clergyman, says: "When the hospital ships became overcrowded, some sick had to be kept on the Jersey."

The Jersey, also called the Old Jersey, is generally described as a condemned hulk, having become unfit from age. The name Jersey, applied to a ship of the line in the British Navy, was perpetuated through centuries, and a list of dates, taken from "Lives of the British Admirals," with the names of Commanders of the Jersey, a fourth-rate ship, is appended:

- 1664. Hugh Hide, Vol. I, p. 57.
- 1664. Sir John Holmes, Vol. I, p. 104.
- 1665. Sir John Du Tiel, Vol. I, p. 163.
- 1672. Sir William Poole, Vol. I, p. 27.
- 1677. Richard Griffith, Vol. II, p. 384.
- 1686. Sir William Jennings.

[Vol. II, pp. 74-76; I, 377, 217; II, 364]: "Having been taken by the French some time prior in the West Indies, the Jersey was used by the French in 1694 to convoy a fleet of merchant ships, eastward bound. Admiral Russell, meeting this fleet, ordered the Resolute and Roebuck, fire ships, to attack the same. During the engagement the Jersey ran for the shore, where she struck on a ridge of rocks. The ship was fired by the crew and blew up. A later ship Jersey captured in 1711 a French merchantman. The Jersey of Revolutionary times was built, according to Dr. Stiles' *Kings Co.*, p. 56, in 1736. In 1745 the Jersey, 60-gun ship, Sir Charles Hardy, Commander, fought the French 74-gun ship, Saint Esprit. She is again mentioned in 1759 as lying off the harbor of Toulon, France, with two other ships-of-the-line, ready to attack the French fleet, then in Toulon Harbor. (*Her Majesty's Navy*, Vol. I, p. 318.) When the Jersey dropped her anchor for the last time, she had reached the age of 44 years, not a great age for war ships of the 18th century. These ships were built of sturdy timbers, and cut the waves until the enemy's guns or the elements sent them into their watery graves. As an example, we may cite the case of the Edgar, another battleship of the British Navy.

[*Her Majesty's Navy*, Lt. C. R. Low, Vol. I, p. 107]: "Admiral Walker's flagship, the Edgar, 70 guns, was in 1711 the oldest ship in the Navy, and there is a tradition that some of her timbers were actually in the ship in which the old Saxon king, after whom she was named, had sailed. The seamen of the fleet considered her loss ominous of disaster, but she was soon replaced by another bearing the same name, and as late as the Crimean War the Edgar was the name of the 90-gun screw-steam-line-of battleship, considered then one of the finest ships in the service."

But the years spent in war service as transport for the troops to the Canadas and later to the United Colonies undoubtedly ran down the ship. The Leviathan of our day may serve as an excellent illustration of the case of the Jersey. Six years ago the Leviathan was one of the most admired ships upon the Atlantic Ocean. Two years of war service

have left their marks upon the vessel, which, however, can be restored to her former condition. The Jersey was then a 64-gun, fourth rate, and had carried about 450 men. Now the guns and stores being removed, she was a very roomy vessel. The captive officers occupied the gunroom, the American sailors were kept in two compartments below the main deck, and the French and Spanish Prisoners in the lowest part, and among the latter the mortality must have been the greatest. Besides the captain, Laird, there were two mates, a steward, a cook, about twelve sailors and as many old marines. The guard, consisting of about thirty men, was weekly relieved, and was made up of groups of Englishmen, Hessians or Refugees. The rations of the Prisoners were equal to two-thirds of a British seaman's allowance, viz., two-thirds of three pounds of biscuit, one and a half pounds of flour, one pint of oatmeal, one pound of beef, two pounds of pork, two pounds of suet, two ounces of butter and a half-pint of peas per week. A Prisoner has stated that the putrid and damaged food given to the Prisoners was procured by the commissaries for little or nothing, and was charged to the English government at the prices of the best provisions. The hospital ships had awnings and windsails at the hatchways, to conduct fresh air between decks; the hatchways were left open during the night on these boats. Patients received one gill of ordinary wine and twelve ounces of bad bread per day. The nurses were of the lowest type. Some benevolent New York citizens furnished all the sick on board the Frederick (a hospital ship at one time) constantly with a pint each daily of Bohea tea, well sweetened with molasses.

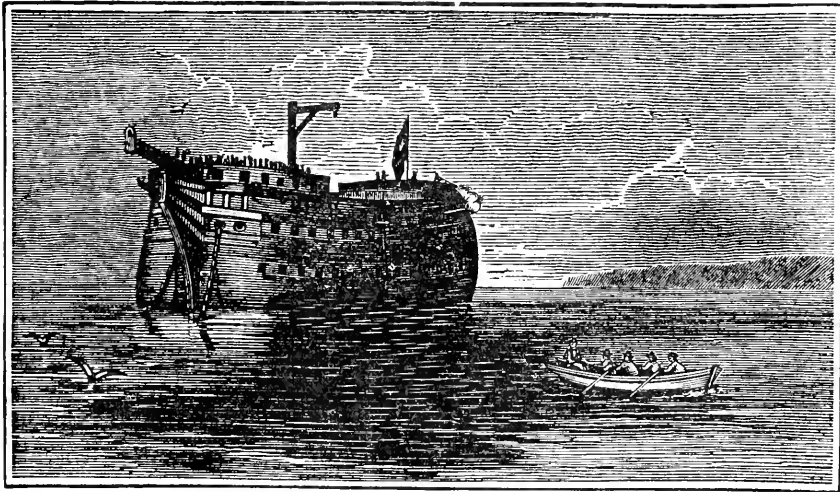
As the writer has already mentioned, the Prison ships have been condemned by all former writers on this subject. Space would not permit to repeat even a small fraction of what has been written along these lines during the past century. The writer has gathered some material from the records left by the Prisoners, which, taken together, may show that there were a few brighter spots upon the dark path of these unfortunates. It is, however, not the writer's intention by emphasizing these points, while the accusations, pronounced



so often against the British officials, are not brought to the front again, to have the jailers appear as guardian angels. In 1779 the English forces at New York just escaped surrender or else starvation, by the arrival of supply ships in the eleventh hour. This danger was for the time averted, but food and fuel remained scarce, and the Prisoners themselves did commit many acts which irritated their keepers. Prisons were then not what they are to-day, and the Prisoners taken on Privateers had not the same claims as those of the Army and Navy, and, lastly, they could not be exchanged. Every American soldier or sailor of the Navy in British hands represented a value in exchange for captured Britons. The men on the Jersey, if unable to purchase their liberty, could only wait for peace or death; they were the victims of circumstances. Captain Dring, one of their number, tells us that they enjoyed their evening's pipe before being sent below deck, and that they celebrated July 4 in 1782 by bringing thirteen little American flags upon deck, which were planted there, but promptly torn down by the guards, by songs and patriotic speeches. A row with a guard followed at night, in course of which Americans were killed. Prisoners were allowed to send three messengers to Washington in 1782. Through these they sent promise that if their release could be procured they would gladly enter the American Army for service during the remainder of the war. Washington obtained improvement of their condition; they received better bread, butter in place of the rancid sweet oil, which had heretofore represented their butter; an awning was provided and a windsail to conduct fresh air between the decks during the day. At night, however, the hatchway was fastened tightly, as formerly. Prisoners who had money, generally sewed in canvas bags or inside of their trousers, could buy their liberty, and were then reported among the dead. Friends were allowed to visit the Prisoners and bring various articles to promote their comfort. Correspondence was allowed, subject to some kind of censure. In some cases Prisoners were permitted to visit their homes upon their word of honor to return to the Jersey at a specified time. Funeral services were allowed, if desired. A physician from

the hospital ship Hunter visited the Jersey daily. Other Prisoners, however, say no physician came ever on board. Prisoners would not use buckets and brushes to cleanse the ship, and had to be forced to work the pumps. They also delighted in annoying the guards and the cook. A gondola was running continually between the shore and the Jersey, bringing seven hundred gallons of fresh water a day to the ship. General Johnson says the Jersey was supplied with water from a spring on his father's farm at the Wallabout. Four Prisoners under a guard carried the water to the gondola. Prisoners could drink all the water they wanted at the "butt," but carry away only one pint at a time. Surplus water was kept in butts in the lower hold which had never been cleaned. The Prisoners had recourse to these when they could procure no other water. The galley was a large copper vessel on the top deck, which was partitioned in the middle. On the one side peas and oatmeal were boiled in fresh water. The meat was boiled on the other side in salt water, which was gotten from alongside the ship. This water was polluted, and the copper became corroded from the use of the salt water. Prisoners who objected to this manner of boiling the meat could prepare the portion allotted to their respective mess in tin vessels. If, as General Johnson says, four Prisoners could carry the daily supply of water to the gondola, an additional Prisoner could have carried the needed supply for cooking the meat in fresh water. The danger, invited by the use of this polluted salt water, existed in the first line, for the Prisoners, but the crew and guard upon the ship were exposed to the same danger in the second line. If typhoid fever or any other contagious disease resulted from its use, the crew would have been infected, and the guard, which was relieved weekly, would have spread such disease to the camp, and eventually to the city. After sundown the men had to be below deck, and only one at the time was allowed to come on the main deck. Fox tells us that the guard on the hatchway was knocked down one night while engaged in conversation with his visitor from below deck. The other Prisoners, coming then on deck, were overpowered by the rest of the guard, which had been attracted by the noise. At another

time, he says, Prisoners got possession of a boat, in which a visitor had come to the ship, got clear of the Jersey, and the Prisoners on board gave three cheers. After that when visitors came the Prisoners were driven below to remain there until the company had departed. On page 145 he states that a recruiting officer came to the ship. The Prisoners had filled a snuffbox with vermin. This they now opened upon the back of the officer's coat. All these things were bound to increase the hatred of the British against the men, and some of their earlier privileges were revoked. On page 108 Fox says: "Many of the Prisoners were foreigners (i. e. Frenchmen), and



*From "Fox's Adventures"*

Successful escape of a captain and four mates from the Jersey, at four o'clock in the afternoon, one day in December, 1780. These men had been taken in a vessel from a Southern port and had been brought to the Prison ship a few days previous.

were on the prison ship for two years, and had given up all hope of ever being exchanged. But far different was the condition of the most numerous class of prisoners, composed mostly of young men from New England, fresh from home." On page 138: "The American sailors suffered even more than the soldiers, for they were confined on board of Prison ships in great numbers, and in a manner which showed that the British officers were willing to treat fellow-beings whose crime

was love of liberty worse than the vilest animals." Stiles, Vol. I, p. 347, speaking of the guard, says: "Hessians were preferred, because of better treatment by them." Ostrander, History of Brooklyn, Vol. II, p. 11, says: "The soldiers in charge of the Prison ships were mostly Hessians, and were universally hated as mercenaries."

[Watson's Annals, p. 336]: General Johnson says: "It has been generally thought that all the Prisoners died on board the Jersey; this is not true. Many may have died on board of her, who were not reported as sick, but all the men who were placed on the sick list were removed to the hospital ships, from which they were usually taken, sewed up in a blanket, to their long home."

[Onderdonck's Revolutionary Incidents of Suffolk Co. and Kings Co., p. 245]: Article dated "Fishkill, May 8, 1783. To all Printers of Public Newspapers: Tell it to the world and let it be published in every newspaper throughout America, Europe, Asia and Africa to the everlasting disgrace and infamy of the British king's commanders at New York, that during the late war it is said 11,644 American Prisoners have suffered death by their inhuman, cruel, savage and barbarous usage on board of the filthy and malignant British Prison ship called the Jersey, lying at New York. Britons, tremble, lest the vengeance of Heaven fall on your isle for the blood of these unfortunate victims. An American." [Ibid, p. 245.] Onderdonck says: "The above paragraph (i. e., letter of May 8, 1783) is the original source of all the reports of the vast numbers who perished in the Prison ships. What number died cannot be even guessed at. All is rumor and conjecture, whether it was 11,500 or half that number."

[Shannon's New York Common Council Manual of 1870, p. 795] has another letter, dated "Fishkill, July 10, 1783," and signed "Americanus." The writer of this letter shows himself to be an irreconcilable foe of Great Britain, and if he is, as it appears likely, also the writer of the letter of May 8, 1783, his accusation cannot be taken at its face value, because his hatred of Great Britain makes him incompetent to judge. At the conclusion of the war, in 1783, the Prisoners, who were still on

board the Jersey, were liberated. The ship was then abandoned. Worms soon destroyed her bottom, and she afterward sank. (Fox.)

John Jackson acquired about 1791 the Remsen mill property, on which the bodies from the Prison ships were interred. In cutting away the volley bank and making other improvements, preparatory to a Navy Yard, in 1803, the bones were exposed. The townspeople wanted the remains deposited in the Dutch churchyard, but Jackson, being a Sachem of the Tammany Society of New York, decided to have that society take care of the case, perhaps for political effect. Benjamin Romeyn was the Grand Sachem in 1808, and under his guidance the remains were deposited in a tomb or vault upon land donated by Jackson. The cornerstone bore an inscription, part of which read as follows: "Sacred to the memory of that portion of American Seamen, Soldiers and Citizens, who perished on board the Prison ships of the British at the Wallabout during the Revolution." Nothing further was done, and after about thirty years the lot on which the vault was situated was sold for taxes, and Romeyn acquired it. He built an ante-chamber over the vault. Part of its inscription was: "The portal to the tomb of the 11,500 patriot Prisoners of War, who died in dungeons and pestilential Prison ships in and about the City of New York during the war of our Revolution." Romeyn was laid to rest here in 1844, aged 82 years. The inscription on the cornerstone of the vault of 1808 read thus: "American Seamen, Soldiers and Citizens." The inscription of the ante-chamber read: "11,500 Prisoners of War who died in dungeons and pestilential Prison ships in and about the City of New York." There are two probable reasons for Romeyn's version. First, some of the bodies of Prisoners who had died in dungeons in New York City, were brought to the Long Island shore for burial. Second, he himself had been for seven weeks a Prisoner in two of the prisons in New York City and wanted to be buried with these remains. Regarding the inscription of the cornerstone of 1808: There is no record extant which would plainly show that any American Soldiers were brought on board of any of the Wallabout Prison ships

for permanent confinement. The first ship, the Whitby, undoubtedly had some landsmen prisoners, probably suspected persons, who had been taken on Long Island, because the prisons in the city had become overcrowded, and the great fire had caused a disturbance in all departments of the British Army.

### PRISONERS IN ENGLAND

[The Prisoners of 1776, Rev. R. Livesey, Boston, 1854.] Charles Herbert was taken prisoner on an American ship at the end of 1776, and was brought to England, where he remained until the early part of 1779, when he was exchanged at Brest, in France. His diary affords some interesting sidelights on the prisons in England. On the ships conditions were such that if these ships had been located for several years in an isolated bay, like the Wallabout, far from the homeland, in times of great want, they would have paralleled the case of the Jersey. Conditions of prisons on land were far superior and improved as time went on. Herbert writes: "Put on Bellisle ship in February, 1777; all Prisoners infected with vermin; 20 to 30 have itch. Transferred to Tarbay; 16 on sick list. Transferred to Burford; 40 have itch. Have good beds. Cases of smallpox and yellow fever. June, 1777, transferred to Old Mill Prison, Plymouth. Cases of smallpox. Many escapes of Prisoners. Men complained at one occasion about quality of bread; at another refused to eat the meat; improvement followed. £7,000 were collected in England for support of Prisoners, and after the sum had been expended, a new subscription was taken." Page 218: "January, 1779: Prisoners had made an attempt to escape and were put on half allowance; they killed a dog belonging to an officer and ate dog meat. There was a great talk in London about eating the dog, and an investigation was set on foot to find out whether it was caused by actual necessity or not." During his stay at the prison Herbert says there were 380 Prisoners, of which 55 escaped, 19 died, 62 enlisted on English ships. He was exchanged with others, 100 in all, at Brest, France.

## CONCLUSION

The British seem to have used the ships at the Wallabout as their general prison for Naval Prisoners on this side of the Atlantic. They brought the men taken on French, Spanish and Dutch vessels into American harbors, and apparently concentrated them at the Wallabout. There were many French captives there. Thus it is likely that many of the dead on the Prison ships were not Americans. Onderdonck's Revolutionary Incidents of Suffolk Co. and Kings Co. have, on pages 228 to 232, notes referring to these Prison ships: "July 10, 1778: About 350 men confined between decks, half Frenchmen. New London, July 31, 1778: Last week 500 or 600 American Prisoners were released from confinement at New York and sent out by way of New Jersey, being exchanged. New London, September 26, 1778: All American Prisoners are nearly sent out of New York, but there are 615 French Prisoners still there. New London, December 18, 1778: A flag with 70 men from the horrible Prison ships at New York arrived, thirty very sickly; 2 died since they arrived. New London, December 25, 1778: A cartel arrived here from New York with 172 American Prisoners, greater part sickly and in most deplorable condition, owing chiefly to the ill usage in the Prison ships, where numbers had their feet and legs frozen. February 4, 1779: 136 from Prison ships sent to New London. January 23, 1779: 200 from Prison ships sent to New Jersey. August 18, 1779: 500 or 600 American Prisoners exchanged; 47 from Prison ship Good Hope sent to New London; for once all are well and healthy; only 150 left. September 1, 1779: 180 American Prisoners sent to New London. September 29, 1779: 117 American Prisoners sent to New London, chiefly from New England. New Haven, July 20, 1780: Only 3 Marine Prisoners, it is said, in New York."

In 1883 the Society of Old Brooklynites published a list of eight thousand names of Prisoners, which were confined on board the Jersey during the war. We quote from this publication: "After diligent research among the records of the British War Department, access to which was kindly permitted

by Her Majesty's Government, this is all that can be found, and these are from the records of this one ship only. No record of the names of any of the Prisoners on the Prison ships Scorpion, John, Strombolo, Falmouth, Hunter, Prince of Wales and Transport can be found, though their log books make very frequent mention of Prisoners having been received on board. The list here printed is, therefore, but a small portion of those of our fellow citizens who were confined on board these floating Golgothas. Nor is it possible to designate which of those names died on board; but authentic history within the memory of the parents of many now living proves that the number that died and were buried on our shores and over whose remains we now desire to erect a monument worthy of these patriots numbered more than 12,000." After this careful research has been made it seems unlikely that we will ever get information as to the exact numbers. But this need not keep us from trying to arrive at figures in our own way, although it is not expected that these figures will be accepted by all readers. General Johnson tells us that after April, 1780, the Jersey was the receiving ship. This fact may explain why the archives of the British War Department do not contain any records of the Prisoners on the other ships. When Prisoners were brought to the Wallabout they were delivered on board the receiving ship and their names entered upon the record book of the Jersey. If distributed over the other ships, for reason of sickness or any other reason, there was no necessity of recording their names again. The other ships were in 1780 the Falmouth and Hope, both used as hospital ships. Later their place was taken by some of the ships named, but there were never more than five ships stationed at the Wallabout at one time, including the receiving ship Jersey. These other ships were considerably smaller than the Jersey. The Falmouth was probably the next in size; there was a frigate of this name in the British Navy, having in 1692 and in 1702 forty-eight guns, and in 1707 fifty guns; she is again mentioned in 1760. The ship at the Wallabout was probably the successor of this ship. It was the custom to apply the old name to a new ship of the same class, if the older ship was lost to an



enemy. by foundering, fire, or else was retired for any other reason. The Good Hope in 1664 carried thirty-four guns, when she was captured in that year by the Dutch, the name was applied to a new vessel. The Hunter was in 1660 a sloop that is, a one-masted vessel; the John at the same time was a ketch, that is, a heavily built, two-masted vessel, both with fore and aft rig. There was a Strombolo in 1696, but we have no description of this vessel. Taking it for granted that the ships found at the Wallabout between 1776 and 1783 were of the same class as the ships bearing the same names a century earlier, we have a base to work upon.

We do know that the first ship stationed here in October, 1776, was the Whitby. She is said to have been crowded, having 250 Prisoners aboard. Thus we have:

|      |  |     |
|------|--|-----|
| 1776 | Whitby, a large transport, was moored near Remsen's Mill .....   | 250 |
| 1777 | Kitty and another large ship, which together took over the Prisoners from Whitby. Both were burnt, in 1777, and 1778 resp.....   | 500 |
| 1778 | Names of ships unknown.....  | 500 |
| 1779 | Names of ships unknown.....  | 500 |
| 1780 | Good Hope; had been lying in North River in October, 1778. Good Hope and Prince of Wales were Prison ships stationed in January, 1779, in North River. In August, 1779, sails and rigging of Good Hope were offered for sale; masts, spars and yards "as good as new." Removed to Wallabout in January, 1780; was burnt March 5, 1780. Transports were lying near by and Prisoners were put aboard the Woodland, where they remained a short time, until the Strombolo and Scorpion were gotten ready. The burnt hulk sank near what was known as Pinder's Island..... | 500 |
| 1780 | Jersey had been lying at Franklin, near Tolmie's Dock, East River, in December, 1778. Was used as Prison ship, East River, 1779. Removed to Wallabout end of April, 1780, as the   |     |

|                         |   |        |
|-------------------------|---|--------|
|                         | receiving ship, and all Prisoners removed to this ship; at first 400, but highest number 1,200  | 1,200  |
| 1780                    | Falmouth, hospital ship.....  | 200    |
| 1780                    | Hope, hospital ship, used in 1783 to transport Loyalists to New Brunswick.....  | 200    |
| 1780                    | Scorpion, sloop of 4 guns, Prison ship, 120-300 Prisoners .....   | 300    |
| 1780                    | Strombolo (a fire ship), Prison ship 150-200 Prisoners .....  | 200    |
| 1780                    | Hunter, sloop, hospital ship.....   | 200    |
| 1781                    | Jersey, 850 Prisoners, on all ships.....  | 2,000  |
| 1782                    | Jersey, May, 1,000 Prisoners; later increased; on all ships.....  | 2,000  |
| 1783                    | Jersey, highest, 1,200; John (transport) used as Prison ship, supplementary to Jersey, 200-300 Prisoners; Frederick, hospital ship; Perseverance, hospital ship; Bristol (packet), hospital ship (hulls offered for sale) ; in all..... | 2,000  |
| Total of Prisoners..... |   | 10,550 |

Prisoners died and their places were taken by others, but those newcomers did not arrive in such numbers that one could say the 1,200 men which were on the Jersey on a New Year's Day were all dead by March or April and new Prisoners had taken their places. But let us suppose that the entire lot of prisoners aboard each ship died during the year and were replaced by the same number of newcomers by December 31, the total number of Prisoners kept on the Prison ships during the whole war would be 10,550. We do also know that many of the Prisoners were foreigners, especially Frenchmen, and that these were held in the lowest compartment of the Jersey. There was, therefore, a greater percentage of dead among these than among the Americans, and we may not be far from the right road when we set down their share as one-third of the total. Thus if all 10,550 Prisoners held on these ships during the entire war (always having in mind our list) died, the victims of the Prison ships consisted of 7,000 Americans and 3,550 foreigners. These figures are, however, as Onder-

donck remarks, about that other figure of 11,500, pure guess-work. The number of Americans thus arrived at, corresponds pretty closely to the figures furnished by the records in the British archives, and in justice to himself the writer must here say that in computing that list he was in no way guided by the other list. The American Prisoners did not all die, and a goodly number of them secured their liberty for money and were officially reported as dead. The British officials were careful to see them get off safely, to encourage others to follow their example. A smaller number escaped from the ships and reached points in New Jersey and Connecticut, where charitable people assisted them in getting back to their old homes and become re-united with their families.

## APPENDIX

### Soldiers in Revolutionary War

|  |         |                 |         |
|--|---------|-----------------|---------|
| New Hampshire,   | 12,407; | Massachusetts,  | 67,907; |
| Rhode Island,  | 5,908;  | Connecticut,    | 31,935; |
| New York,  | 17,781; | New Jersey,     | 10,726; |
| Pennsylvania,  | 25,678; | Delaware,       | 3,386;  |
| Maryland,  | 13,912, | Virginia,       | 26,678; |
| North Carolina,  | 7,363;  | South Carolina, | 6,147;  |
| Georgia,   | 2,619.  | Total.....      | 232,447 |
| Of which lived in 1839 and received pensions.....  | 32,925  |                 |         |
| Army, August 26, 1776.....   | 20,375  |                 |         |
| Of which were on sick list.....  | 3,600   |                 |         |
| British Army August 26, 1776, nearly.....  | 30,000  |                 |         |
| American Prisoners taken August 27, 1776.....  | 1,097   |                 |         |
| American Prisoners taken in 1776, total, held in New York City, of whom 4,131 were soldiers..... | 10,000  |                 |         |
| American Prisoners, total during war, 1776-1783, held in New York City.....                      | 20,000  |                 |         |
| Of which died: three-fourths.....  | 15,000  |                 |         |
| From Connecticut papers referring to Prison ships:   |         |                 |         |
| May, 1781: 1,100 French and American Prisoners died last winter .....                            | 1,100   |                 |         |
| May, 1782: 500 Prisoners died during the past six months .....                                   | 500     |                 |         |

## PRISONS IN NEW YORK CITY

The Provost or Jail, later Hall of Records, used for more notorious prisoners.

Sugar House, in Liberty Street, adjoining Middle Dutch Church.

Brick church, Beekman Street and Park Row, later site of Potter Building, afterwards used as hospital.

North Dutch Church, corner William and Fulton Streets, made to hold 2,000 prisoners. Onderdonck says 800.

Middle Dutch Church, east side Nassau Street, between Cedar and Liberty, made to hold 3,000 prisoners.

Kings College (Columbia College), at end of (old) Park Place, used for a short time only.

City Hall, Nassau and Wall Streets (Sub-Treasury), afterwards used as prison for whaleboatmen, etc.

Bridewell, in (City Hall) Park, used for a time only.

Quaker Meeting House, present Pearl Street, north end Hague Street, afterwards used as hospital.

Presbyterian Church, Wall Street, nearly opposite end of New Street.

Scotch Church, Cedar Street, south side, between Nassau and Broadway, afterwards used as hospital.

French Church, Pine Street, north corner of Nassau Street, used afterward as ordnance store house.

Rhineland Sugarhouse, corner Duane and Rose Streets.

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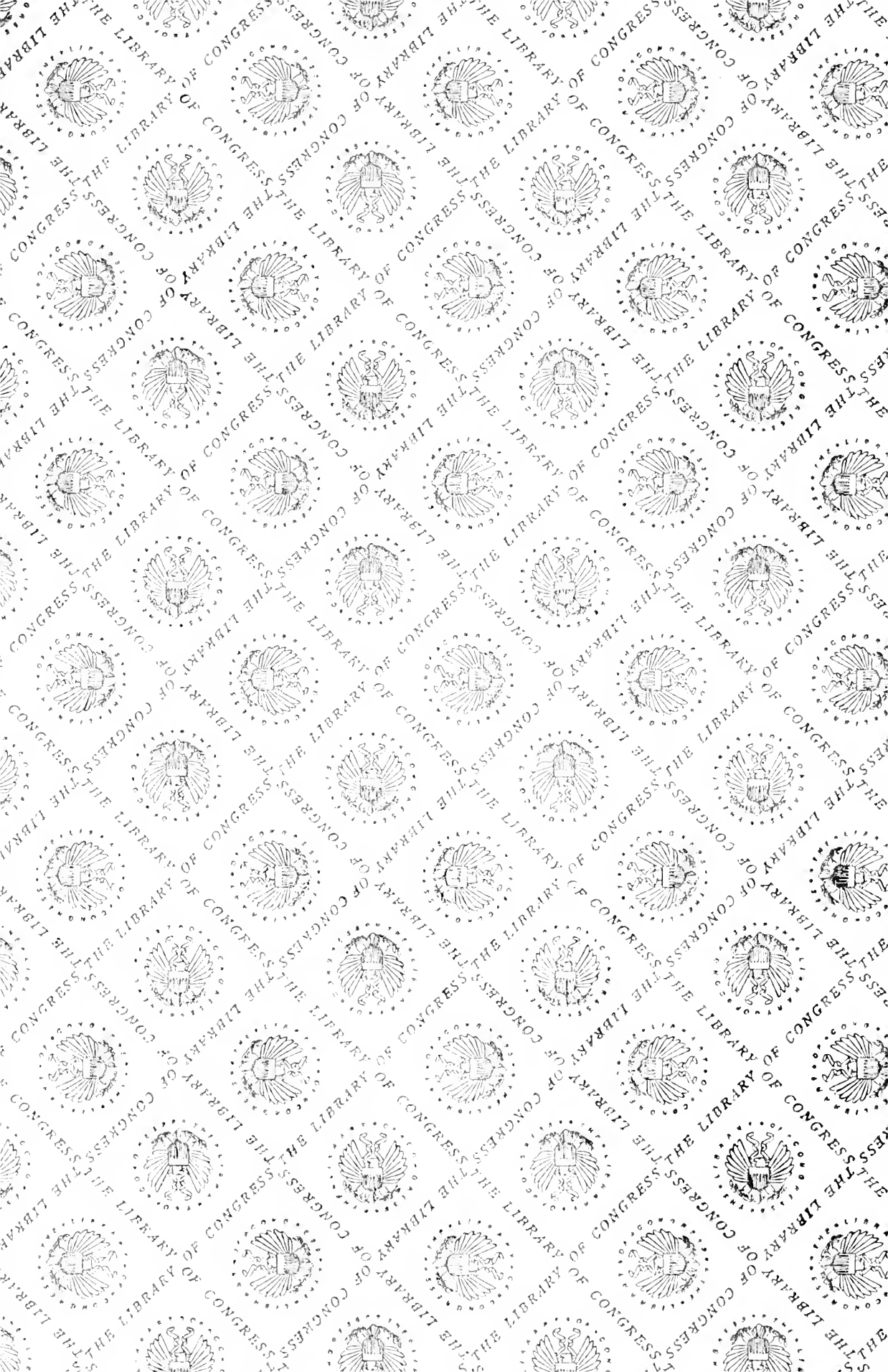


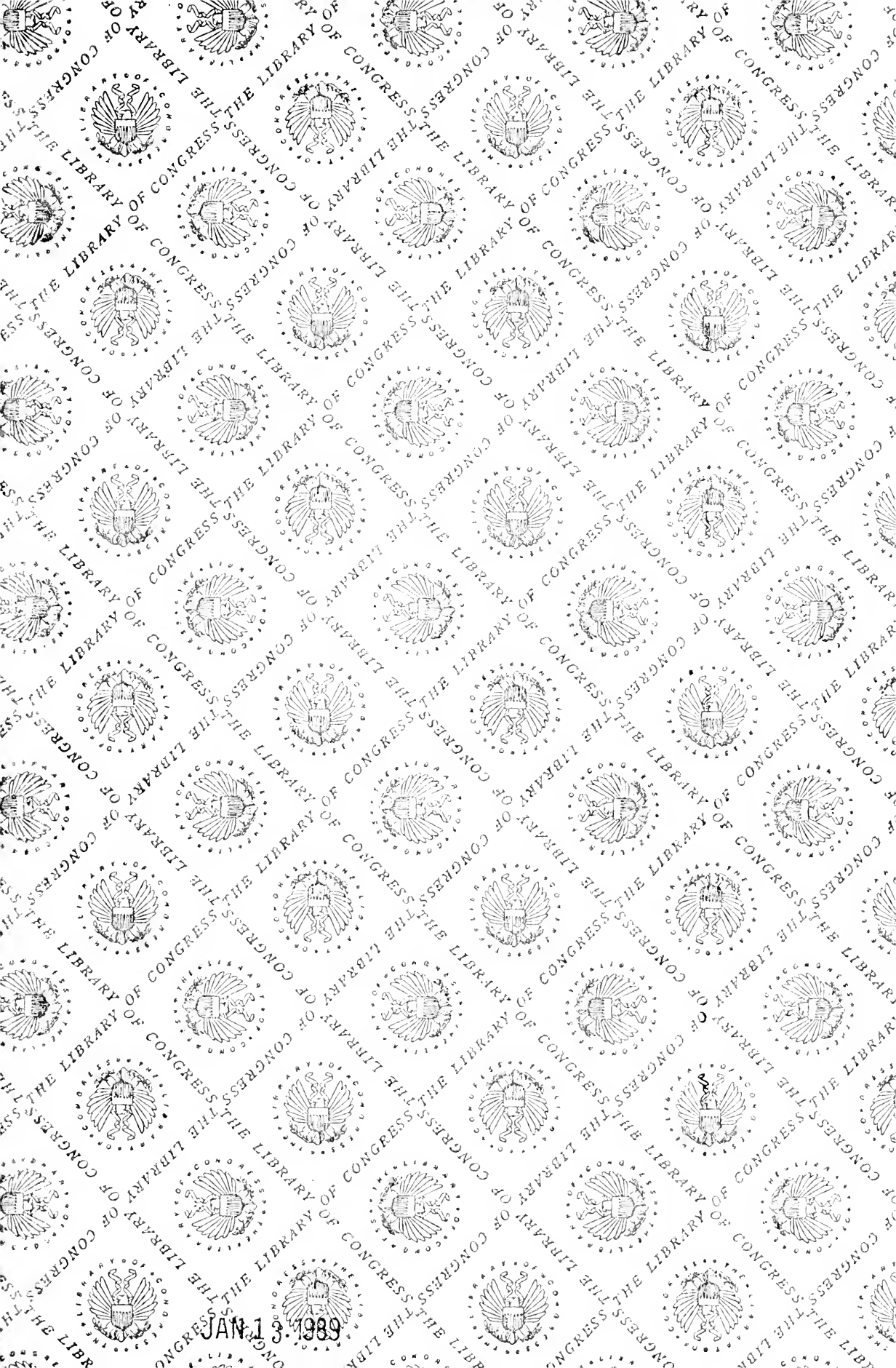












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